

Introduction

HOW DOES ONE UNDERSTAND SCRIPTURE? WHAT ROLE DO scholars play in understanding religious texts? What should lay Muslims do when they encounter scripture that conflicts with a scholarly opinion? These questions are often at the center of religious disputes among Muslims in the modern world and have sparked debates among scholars and nonscholars alike. The fierce intellectual debates between Salafis and Traditionalists have been a prominent feature of Islamic intellectual history in the twentieth century. Although they both draw from the same sources, each of these groups considers itself to be the authentic version of Islam. Traditionalism is an institutional understanding of Islam that developed over centuries of scholarship. Traditionalists advocate a deference to precedent (*taqlīd*) of the *madhhabs* as a means for Muslims to understand Islam.¹ On the other hand, purist Salafis view themselves as a group that is purifying the syncretic practices that crept into the faith over many centuries. Salafis consider the uncritical following of the *madhhabs* to be the root cause of the Muslim world's political, economic, and social decline. They advocate for a return to the Qur'ān and Sunna as they were understood by the earliest Muslim generations.

Throughout Islamic history, the '*ulamā*' played a leading role in developing Islamic law and dogma. Prior to the advent of modernity, states were not robust enough to define religion across vast geographical regions. It was the '*ulamā*' who spoke for Islam and had a monopoly over religious education

¹ *Taqlīd* has been translated as "blind imitation," "uncritical following," and "slavish imitation." Sherman Jackson's translation of *taqlīd* as deference to precedent is more accurate because it represents the utilization and capacity of *taqlīd* in Islamic law. See Sherman Jackson, "Ijtihād and *taqlīd*: Between the Islamic Legal Tradition and Autonomous Western Reason," in *Routledge Handbook of Islamic Law*, ed. Khaled Abou El Fadl, Ahmad Atif Ahmad, and Said Fares Hassan (New York: Routledge 2019), 261.

and authority. Since the mid-nineteenth century, both state and lay intellectuals have emerged as other voices. These lay intellectuals were usually not trained in Islamic sciences, but their voices were often in accordance with western thought or appealed to modern sensibilities. Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (d. 1999) is one of the twentieth century's most successful Salafi leaders who attracted millions of followers throughout the Muslim world. His teachings challenged the religious authority of traditionally trained '*ulamā*'. His call to follow the Qur'ān, Sunna, and the *salaf* sparked debates about the authority of the '*ulamā*' in interpreting religious texts. These debates were not limited to scholarly circles, but they occurred in mosques, coffee shops, online, and in social gatherings. The points of contention between Albānī and his critics impacted the religious understanding of millions of Muslims. At the crux of the issue is defining what the Sunna is, who best represents it, and how it is properly understood.

Other individuals or movements who attempted to start a ḥadīth-focused movement did not have the same impact as Albānī. For instance, the Ahl al-Ḥadīth movement was limited to a particular Muslim context like India but had little influence outside the South Asian context. Albānī's ideas spread internationally because he was a recognizable intellectual power across the Muslim world. Of all Salafi thinkers from the 1960s until today, he is the most recognizable. Albānī is the Salafi that most non-Salafis know because he proselytized his Salafi thought to them in a way that others did not. His fame and reputation were not only due to his dissemination of Salafi thought, but also his encyclopedic knowledge of ḥadīth. He was a self-taught populist who rebelled against the scholarly class in an attempt to purify Islam from unauthenticated scholarly traditions. His teachings appealed to ordinary people who were dissatisfied with Traditionalist '*ulamā*'. He rejected the idea of following any school or methodology except the pristine texts. As such he only referred to himself as a Salafi because he wished to follow an untainted version of Islam. Albānī is often referred to as the greatest ḥadīth scholar of modern times and his supporters gave him the title of a *mujaddid*. He was not only admired for his knowledge, but for his commitment and keenness to purging Islam from foreign elements.²

The post-Ottoman political and religious context facilitated the contestation of traditional '*ulamā*' and the issue of religious authority took center stage. Colonization, modernization, and globalization all contributed to

² See J. Wagemakers, "Salafism's Historical Continuity: The Reception of 'Modernist' Salafis by 'Purist' Salafis in Jordan," *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 30, no. 2 (2019), 213. Also see Jacob Olidort, *The Politics of "Quietist" Salafism* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2015), 15–19.

creating a plethora of religious movements all claiming authenticity and contesting the authority of traditional *‘ulamā’*. Although Muslim feminists, progressives, secularists, and Salafis are all different, they share an anticlericalist approach to Islamic studies. They view the *‘ulamā’* as backward and as a barrier that prevents the masses from identifying the “true” teachings of Islam. While this book focuses on the tensions between purist Salafis and Traditionalists, it has broader implications for the status of the *‘ulamā’* as the gatekeepers of Islamic knowledge. The purpose of this book is to analyze the assumptions, implications, and impact of Salafis and Traditionalists on modern Islamic thought. We cannot properly understand either Salafis or Traditionalists without analyzing how they interacted with each other.

Experts in Near Eastern studies suggest that Salafism is symptomatic of the modern political turmoil in the Muslim world. Religious studies scholars have highlighted Salafi disagreements with traditional *‘ulamā’*; but they tend to operate under the assumption that modern Salafism is a transcription of purist movements of the past replicated or cloned into modernity. Only recently have academics begun turning their attention to Salafism, but most works focus on the political aspect of the movement. Failure to account for the compelling nature of the religious message of Salafism will result in the mischaracterizing of the movement as politically, rather than religiously, driven. Overemphasizing the political aspects of Salafism is problematic because Salafism is not a political movement but rather a method of understanding Islam. Political stances do not define what makes one a Salafi, instead they are identified by their religious beliefs and practices. To remedy this gap, I focus on the religious message of Salafism and how it created a version of Islam that stands in stark contrast to Traditionalism.

I do not attempt to speak of Salafism at large, rather I focus on Albānī’s brand of purist Salafism. The decision to focus on Albānī is due to his distinction among Salafis. Unlike other leading Salafis, he was intensely engaged in scripturally charged and heated debates with Traditionalists throughout the Muslim world. These disputes were not limited to scholarly circles, but large numbers of students and religious activists served as audiences.

Searching the term “Salafism” on any academic database results in dozens of articles almost all of which mention Albānī. He was a towering and compelling individual in Salafi circles and the most aggressive disseminator of Salafi thought in modern times. Many Salafis see this influential figure as *the* representative of an authentic and scripture-based Islam. They consider his legal, political, and religious stances to be based on authentic scriptural

proof-texts. To many Salafis, Albānī was a reformer who sought to help Muslims return to the authentic teachings of Islam, mainly the path of the Muslim forefathers. Others, however, perceive him to be a thinker who has gone astray due to his bypassing of Muslim legal institutions.

Albānī's life and works are important because he played a major role in establishing and propagating modern Salafism. Traditionalists were threatened by his anticlerical message because they believed that it collapsed any division between the scholarly class and those with no religious training. In other words, they feared that if everyone approached the Qur'ān and Sunna directly, then the '*ulamā*' would no longer be the gatekeepers to "authentic" Islamic knowledge. As a result, Traditionalists throughout the Muslim world felt the need to refute and respond to Albānī and his followers. These debates and discussions resulted in dozens of books and treatises between Albānī and Traditionalist scholars.

This should not give the impression that this book is only about Albānī because it equally focuses on Traditionalism. Purist Salafis and Traditionalists are best understood in light of the dialogues and debates they had with each other. Neither group was formed in a vacuum, but their stances on religious issues were almost always developed as a response to each other. Both groups typify a particular religious phenomenon in contemporary Islam. The larger methodological problems of textual interpretation in modern Islam are exemplified by their differences in a particularly pertinent way. The convergence between purist Salafis and Traditionalists over the contested role of the *madhhabs* is key for understanding how Islamic scriptures are understood and interpreted in the modern Muslim world.

Leading anti-*madhhab* Salafis inspired a new group of young intellectuals in the Muslim world to begin redefining Islam by taking its interpretation out of the iron grip of the Traditionalist '*ulamā*' and seizing for themselves the power to interpret Islam. Through a detailed reconstruction of the dynamically heated debates between the two groups, I analyze the context of the scripturally charged rhetoric against and in defense of particular hermeneutical methods.

Among the arguments I make is that the primary difference between purist Salafis and Traditionalists is not necessarily the content of what it means to be a practicing Muslim, but rather their attitude toward scholarly tradition. While Traditionalists view scholarly tradition as an essential component for the proper understanding of Islam, purist Salafis do not consider it a necessary precondition to Islamic scholarship. I illustrate how

their conflicting approaches impact how both groups approach Islamic education, law, and ḥadīth.

This book is divided into three sections. The first is historical, contextualizing Traditionalism and purist Salafism in the twentieth century. The second focuses on their differences in Islamic law and the third on ḥadīth. Chapter 1 introduces the main religious movements that will be discussed in the book, namely Salafis and Traditionalists, and how they relate to Islamic Modernists. Chapter 2 provides a biography of Albānī and contextualizes the origins of his critique of Traditionalism.

In Chapter 3, I analyze how religious authority is produced in traditional Islamic circles. I explain how their educational methods, and how the degeneration of these methods, as well as the rise of print and technology, mass literacy, modernity, and secularism, resulted in the emergence of self-taught reformers.

In the second part of the book my focus shifts to Islamic law. In Chapter 4, I analyze the differences between purist Salafis and Traditionalists concerning legal pluralism, consensus, and certainty in Islamic law. Chapter 5 expounds on the role of scholars in interpreting scripture. In particular, I shed light on the differences between purist Salafis and Traditionalists on *taqlīd*, *ijtihād*, and adhering to the *madhhab*s.

Along with his efforts to purge Islamic law, Albānī tried to purify the Sunna and make it more accessible to common Muslims. In this final part of the book, I analyze their differences concerning ḥadīth studies. Chapter 6 focuses on the use and value of weak ḥadīth and Albānī's controversial project of removing all weak narrations from the canonical ḥadīth collections. Chapter 7 examines the impact Albānī had on the field of ḥadīth studies and his ḥadīth methodology.

Part I

History

Traditionalism and Salafism

WITH THE FALL OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE, SCHOLARS AND activists in the Muslim world struggled to revive the life of a fallen caliphate. The social, economic, and political turmoil faced by the Muslim world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries motivated Muslim scholars and reformers to seek a practical model for the restoration of a Muslim society. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, several groups emerged with the aim of reforming Islam. These reformers viewed Islam as the main unifying idiom of their society prior to the colonial encounter. The solution they proposed was that returning to a pure version of Islam would unify Muslims in political and social resistance. They wanted Muslims to chart their own destiny and have parity with the west. Three main groups can be distinguished: Islamic Modernists, Traditionalists, and Salafis. These three groups will be discussed in this chapter in order to locate their place in modern Islamic thought. It is essential to understand the religious context in which Salafis and Traditionalists engaged with each other.

Each of these groups shares a belief in God and in Muhammad as God's final messenger. Given this acceptance and veneration of Muhammad, his life exemplifies God's commandments par excellence. In Sunni Islam, the Prophet and the earliest Muslim generations were considered to be the best people of all time and Muslims seek to relive, even partially, that time period. All of these movements seek to revive the way of the early Muslim generations, and those who led these movements were individuals who symbolized the expectations of their community. Many of these reformers believed that the revival of the Muslim world depended on the morality and spiritual state of individuals, and all three of these groups considered Islamic knowledge and practice to be the key to political, social, and economic success.

However, these individuals were not infallible, and their authority could be challenged. There is no priesthood in Islam. Sunni Muslims do not grant anyone special authority based on family or lineage. Those with religious knowledge, piety, wisdom, and insight are recognized by the community and this recognition is what gives them authority. These modern reformers attempted to act as representatives of the Prophet in the twentieth century and, despite their similarities, they competed for religious authority. They shared an understanding that Muslims had gone astray from the true teachings of Islam; what they differed on is what those true teachings were. They agreed that Muslims were alienated from and out of touch with the original teachings of Islam: thus, an important question was whether Muslims should understand Islam by going back to the Qur'ān and teachings of Muhammad, or if they should follow traditions established by previous scholarly generations?

Much of this debate revolves around the question of who speaks for Islam. The historical answer to this question for 1,300 years was that it was the *'ulamā'*, traditional scholars who developed Islamic law and dogma. As states, prior to the advent of modernity, were not robust enough to define religion across vast geographical regions, it was the voices of Muslim scholars that mattered. However, since the mid-nineteenth century, both state and lay intellectuals have emerged as other voices. These lay intellectuals were not always trained in Islamic sciences, but their teachings resonated with Muslims seeking authenticity.

ISLAMIC MODERNISM

Islamic Modernists are sometimes referred to as Salafiyya or Salafis however, it is historically inaccurate to apply these terms to them. The most famous Islamic Modernists of the nineteenth century include individuals such as Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897), Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905), and Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935). These individuals attempted to reform Islam so that it became compatible with the political, economic, social, scientific, and educational advancements of their time. They considered themselves to be moderate Muslims who followed a balanced form of Islam identical to that of the Prophet and his Companions. Instead of resisting the accomplishments of the west, Islamic Modernists embraced them as part of Islam. They regarded scientific advancements, women's rights, and modern political institutions to be in conformity with the true teachings of Islam.

Islamic Modernists accepted new ideas about reason, progress, science, and technology, and incorporated them into a vision of Islam that held out

to Muslims the promise of remaining true and authentic to their Muslim identity while also adopting knowledge from the west. They were concerned with making Islam relevant and meaningful to the present, and, as a result, placed a strong emphasis on the use of reason. The movement targeted the educated and intellectual class in hopes of freeing Muslims from what they perceived to be stagnant tradition. Modernists highlighted the intelligence and versatility of the earliest Muslim generations in order to encourage Muslims to break free from tradition, which was mainly excessive Sufism and strict adherence to the *madhhab*s, and open themselves to western advancements.

Islamic Modernists directly interpreted the principal Islamic texts, understood reason, and sought *ijtihād* through the prism of modernity, which was perceived as the internalized powerful influence against which the project of Islamic reconstruction and revival was envisioned.¹ Therefore, Islamic Modernism arose mostly as a response to the western colonization of the Muslim world, and only partly from within the Islamic tradition itself. The movement emerged from the reservations of Muslims concerning the west's advancements over the apparently regressive Muslim world. For Islamic Modernists, it was essential to reform Islamic teachings in light of modern advancements in order to make Islam relevant and meaningful to the present.

They considered their reform comprehensive because it sought to influence law, society, politics, as well as intellectual and moral issues. What made the movement so significant was its scholarly élan and the specifically intellectual and spiritual issues that it addressed. This awakening struck a new and powerful chord in the minds of many Muslims because they believed that intellectual issues had remained under self-imposed stagnation and dormancy at the insistence of a conservative orthodoxy for centuries.² One of the most important figures of the Islamic Modernist movement was Muḥammad ‘Abduh, an intellectual Egyptian theologian whose legal and political theory attracted many followers in the Muslim world. Among ‘Abduh’s most important goals was to challenge uncritical acceptance of opinions and “rigid” ways of interpreting religious texts. He placed great

¹ Basheer Nafi, “The Rise of Islamic Reformist Thought and Its Challenge to Traditional Islam,” in *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Suha Farouki and Basheer Nafi (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 40.

² Fazlur Rahman, “Islamic Modernism: Its Scope, Method and Alternatives,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 1, no. 4 (1970), 317.

emphasis on the principle of public welfare (*maṣḥala*) and social needs of the time.

Rashīd Riḍā, ‘Abduh’s main student, is usually viewed in a more positive light among conservative Muslims compared to his teacher, because Riḍā was not considered to be a staunch modernist like ‘Abduh. As a leading Muslim scholar, Riḍā’s ideas would later influence a variety of Muslim thinkers in the twentieth century. Riḍā focused on the weaknesses of Muslim societies compared to dominant western nations and called on Muslims to return to the authentic teachings of the religion. Riḍā’s criticism of excessive Sufism and *taqlīd* would later inspire Salafis, like Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, to the study of ḥadīth in an effort to “purify” Islam.³ At the same time, Riḍā’s student Maḥmūd Abū Rayya (d. 1970) doubted and rejected most of the ḥadīth corpus. Abū Rayya only accepted *mutawātir* ḥadīth,⁴ undermined Abū Huraira’s credibility, and asserted that most ḥadīth collections were simply fabrications.⁵ Abū Rayya furthered the arguments of Islamic Modernism by arguing that “true Islam” was in accordance with the main sensibilities of the omnipresent west. In order to return Islam to its modernistic essence, it was essential to do away with medieval scholarship that was the work of fallible humans.⁶

Islamic Modernists attempted to reform Islam from within Islamic tradition, and this reform stemmed from a sense of inferiority to the west. In order for Muslims to advance, they had to lead western lifestyles. They responded to western technology and imperialism by rejecting many aspects of Islam that were not in conformity with the west. For instance, ‘Abduh would only accept traditions that dealt with dogma such as paradise, hell, and judgment. Although ‘Abduh was not a secularist, his methodology opened the door to secularism in the Muslim world. For instance, he held the perspective that if the Prophet is fallible, then what he did as a leader of a community, as a person, and a legislator is not part of the religion. If the Prophet’s message was only spiritual in nature, then everything else he said or did becomes irrelevant.⁷

³ Daniel Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 64–66.

⁴ *Mutawātir* ḥadīth are sayings of the Prophet that have been narrated by such a large number of people in every generation that it is impossible for all of them to have gathered upon a lie, therefore making *mutawātir* representative of the highest level of authenticity.

⁵ Maḥmūd Abū Rayya, *Aḍwā’ ‘alā al-Sunna al-Muḥammadiyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma’ārif, 1980).

⁶ Jonathan Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet’s Legacy* (London: Oneworld, 2014), 79.

⁷ D. Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 64–66.

Conversely, Salafis and Traditionalists consider all of the Prophet's words and actions to be divinely inspired and consequently cannot be dismissed. Both Salafis and Traditionalists do not pay much attention to Islamic Modernists and dismiss them as imitators of Orientalists. Jonathan Brown correctly points out that "for both groups, Westernization and any Muslim contaminated by it are evils beyond the scope of dialogue."⁸ Associating with the west or being influenced by it was considered evil not only by Traditionalists and Salafis, but by the general Muslim population. As a result, Islamic Modernists were not very successful in their efforts to reform Islam, although they did certainly lay the foundation for the emergence of modern Salafism.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed an increasing rise of scholars in the Muslim world who were calling for reform. Some of these well-known reformers were: Shah Walī Allāh al-Dahlawī (d. 1762), 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Dihlawī (d. 1824), Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (d. 1898), and Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān (d. 1888) in India; Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1792) in the Arabian Peninsula; Muḥammad al-Shawkānī (d. 1834) in Yemen; Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Sanūsī (d. 1859) in Libya; Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī (d. 1914) and Ṭāhir al-Jazā'irī (d. 1920) in Damascus; and Muḥammad al-Zābidī (d. 1791), Muḥammad 'Abduh, and Rashīd Riḍā in Cairo. Each of these individuals was distinct; however, each played a role in laying the ground for the emergence of Albānī and his brand of Salafism. For instance, Islamic Modernists' critique of *taqlīd* and traditional '*ulamā*' paved the way for anti-*madhhab* Salafis. What Salafis have most in common with Islamic Modernists is their criticism of *taqlīd* and their call to return to the ways of the earliest Muslim generations.

During the nineteenth century, when the Ottoman Empire was in decline, Ottoman rulers adopted measures that removed religious personnel and principles from their customary roles in administrative, legal, and educational institutions. This step toward secularism transformed the upper class of Arab cities such as Damascus. For centuries, this group mostly consisted of Traditionalist scholars, but within a few decades they were almost totally displaced from their powerful positions. The responses to this secularism were varied. Some '*ulamā*' responded by either holding closely to legal tradition or turning to a scripturally literalist methodology. While some Muslims adopted and embraced secularism, Islamic Modernists such as 'Abduh remained convinced that Islam and western teachings, although

⁸ Jonathan Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 307.

different, do not contradict each other. For Islamic Modernists, the inadequacy of the Muslim world in relation to the west only made sense if one believed that Muslims had strayed from “true” Islam, hence the necessity of returning to scripture.⁹ ‘Abduh believed in a modernity that was different from the west, which, as he was a Muslim, incorporated a view of modernism that was not secular. Unlike western secularism, it incorporated religion, the individual, community, and state; but, in his view, it was no less modern.¹⁰

Additionally, Islamic Modernists understood that the west presented a military threat to the Muslim world and countering this required that Muslims unite by overlooking their differences. Islamic Modernists and Salafis considered these differences to have stemmed from excessive Sufism and preferring *fiqh* over authentic proof-text. They also believed that Muslims could only overcome their differences by returning to scripture and the spirit of Islam, and it was in Damascus, among other cities, where this anti-traditional movement was growing. The anti-*madhhab* attitude found in Salafism did not arise out of a vacuum, but existed among earlier Modernists such as Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī who, although he had a different methodology, shared an anti-Traditionalist attitude with the Salafis.¹¹ While ‘Abduh and Riḍā shared a preference for certain concepts with Salafis, such as an emphasis on *tawhīd* and a rejection of *taqlīd*, ultimately theirs was a thoroughly modernist discourse, as opposed to the purist approach of Salafis.¹²

The origins and significance of the Islamic Modernist trend in late Ottoman Damascus represented their response to secularist tendencies in Ottoman educational and legal institutions on the one hand, and the projection of European power in the Middle East on the other. The Islamic Modernists’ vision of remaining true to Islam while simultaneously adopting knowledge from the west clashed with the vision of many ‘*ulamā*’, who believed that the best way to preserve Islam was by holding on to its remaining bastions such as the religious court, school, and mosque.¹³ Itzhak Weismann argues that reform movements in late Ottoman Syria

⁹ David Commins, *Islamic Reform Politics and Social Change in Late Ottoman Syria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 3.

¹⁰ Samira Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: Reform, Rationality, and Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 28.

¹¹ D. Commins, *Islamic Reform*, 4.

¹² Joas Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 7.

¹³ D. Commins, *Islamic Reform*, 5.

have their origins in the efforts of religious men of learning and mysticism. They sought to carve a middle path that avoided the rigidity of legal scholars who ignored mystic thought, and popular Sufis who neglected religious learning. The combination of *‘ilm* and *taṣawwuf* gave the Modernist reformists a claim to orthodoxy they might not have had otherwise.¹⁴ Weismann notes that the reformist members of the Akbariyya turned from the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) to the more scripture-based teachings of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), which formed the early beginnings of Islamic Modernism and Salafism.¹⁵ Their organization was mostly a response to the popular *‘ulamā*’ and Sufi shaykhs whose preeminence seemed to stem more from their connection with the government than through their piety or knowledge. As a result, early Islamic Modernists focused their attention on the local masses of Damascus.¹⁶

Islamic Modernists primarily attracted recent graduates of the Ottoman high school in Damascus. They appealed to Syrian youth who were state educated by formulating Islam in a manner that harmonized their Muslim identity with their desire to adopt western advancements. Islamic Modernists and high school graduates were united by their intellectual elitism, an ethic of professionalism, and frustrated ambitions in religious and political reform.¹⁷ Many Islamic Modernists in Damascus such as al-Qāsimī belonged to rural or small urban families, not to the entrenched *‘ulamā*’ aristocracy of the urban notables. In this sense, Damascene reformers had no particular interest in maintaining the status quo, which had heavy social implications for the Traditionalist establishment.¹⁸

This struggle between the Islamic Modernists and Traditionalist scholars who held high positions began to divide the two classes of scholars in Damascus. Many Muslims found themselves joining one side or the other, and the Islamic arena in Damascus became indefinitely divided. Damascene reformers like al-Qāsimī and al-Jazā’irī were calling for *ijtihād* as an Islamic way of celebrating rationality and reason, while simultaneously portraying Traditionalists as blind followers.¹⁹ They criticized *taqlīd* of the *madhhab*s and rejected religious innovations and often implicitly criticized Traditionalists who dominated religious establishments in Damascus. Traditionalists were trying to maintain the religious, political, and social

¹⁴ Itzhak Weismann, *A Taste of Modernity: Sufism, Salafīyya, and Arabism in Late Ottoman Damascus* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2009), 310–315.

¹⁵ I. Weismann, *Modernity*, 149–156. ¹⁶ I. Weismann, *Modernity*, 274.

¹⁷ D. Commins, *Islamic Reform*, 5.

¹⁸ D. Commins, *Islamic Reform*, 38–48; B. Nafi, “Reformist Thought,” 40.

¹⁹ B. Nafi, “Reformist Thought,” 34–39.

status quo. Religious careers and establishments in late Ottoman Syria were in steep decline. Administration, education, and law were once careers that were exclusive to trained scholars, but they became the realm of those who were trained in western and modern educational models.²⁰ The seed of anti-Traditionalism in Damascus was planted, and Traditionalism was viewed as a weed in the soil from which authentic Islam was to grow.

CONTEMPORARY MODERNISTS

Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 1996) and Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī are contemporary Islamic Modernists who were influenced by Riḍā. Ghazālī is one of Qaraḍāwī's most influential teachers. Despite their similarities, they have had a very different impact on the Muslim world, and Qaraḍāwī is usually viewed as an independent school. What distinguishes Qaraḍāwī is his emphasis on *wasatīyya* or taking the middle ground. Their efforts for reform are different from those of 'Abduh and Riḍā because they lived in different eras. Nevertheless, Islamic Modernists like Riḍā, Ghazālī, and Qaraḍāwī agree with Salafis on the importance and status of ḥadīth in Islam, but they differ in their method of interpretation. Similar to Traditionalists, Qaraḍāwī and Ghazālī make ḥadīth subservient to Islamic legal theory and the overarching teachings of the Qur'ān. However, Qaraḍāwī and Ghazālī do not limit themselves to a specific legal school when interpreting Islam. Ghazālī takes a more unstructured interpretive approach, which sometimes means dismissing ḥadīth he disagrees with or going against consensus. Qaraḍāwī on the other hand often came to similar conclusions as Ghazālī, but did so through a much more systematic method, while maintaining the authoritative place of consensus in Islamic law. Nevertheless, several Salafis such as Albānī, 'Abd al-'Azīz Ibn Bāz (d. 1999), and Ṣāliḥ al-Fawzān were critical of Qaraḍāwī's method, especially the perceived liberalism in his work *The Lawful and Prohibited in Islam*.²¹

Both Qaraḍāwī and Ghazālī have similar inclinations, but their style of argumentation is vastly different. David Warren argues that Qaraḍāwī's cautiousness and structure were often a response to Salafi critiques. Qaraḍāwī tried to preserve unity or reconcile between the unstructured

²⁰ D. Commins, *Islamic Reform*, 39–64.

²¹ David Warren, "Debating the Renewal of Islamic Jurisprudence (Tajdīd al-Fiqh): Yusuf al-Qaradawi, His Interlocutors, and the Articulation, Transmission and Reconstruction of the Fiqh Tradition in the Qatar-Context" (Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Manchester, 2015), 66. Also see Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, *Ghāyat al-Marām fī Takhrīj Aḥādīth al-Ḥalāl wa l-Ḥarām* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1980).

approach of Ghazālī and the punctilious approach of Albānī and other Salafis.²² They both aim to define the role of the Sunna not merely in isolation, but in the broader context of Islamic law. Qaraḍāwī, for instance, outlines three general characteristics of Islam as it is reflected in the Sunna: universality, balance, and simplicity. If the Sunna represents all these things, then any ḥadīth that contradicts them does not represent the true Sunna. In other words, the Sunna can only be known within this broader framework of Islamic legal principles. However, Qaraḍāwī is more cautious than Ghazālī in the application of this method and he affirms that the Sunna rules over the Qurʾān.²³ The approach of Qaraḍāwī and Ghazālī can be traced back to Riḍā, who argued that any ḥadīth that contradicts the Qurʾān should be rejected regardless of its chain of narration.²⁴ Although they approached this issue in different ways, both thinkers were open to reform in Islamic law and were willing to go against the apparent meanings of an authentic ḥadīth, whereas Salafis held closer to the direct and apparent meaning. Albānī accuses both Ghazālī and Qaraḍāwī of whimsically interpreting Islam according to their modernist tendencies. Albānī states:

The point is that they have the same methodology (*manhaj*) which contradicts the Sunna. When Ghazālī declares a ḥadīth to be weak you will find that Qaraḍāwī agrees with him and vice versa . . . Qaraḍāwī wants to tailor Islam to modernity. He wants Islam to be modified to conform with the desires of modernists in these times, he often does this and there appears to be a hidden motive behind it all.²⁵

He reproaches them for following their whims because they appear to give more attention to the *matn* of the ḥadīth while disregarding its *isnād*. They do not only strengthen weak ḥadīth, but also weaken authentic ḥadīth depending on the message it contains and not the *isnād*. Ghazālī was more liberal in his approach to ḥadīth than Qaraḍāwī. Qaraḍāwī acknowledges the problematic nature of using only the *matn* to determine a ḥadīth authenticity, because of the inherent subjectivity in a scholar's interpretation. Qaraḍāwī insists that the *isnād* must be used as a means to measure the potential authenticity of a text. However, it does not necessarily follow that

²² D. Warren, "Islamic Jurisprudence," 90–91.

²³ D. Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 119. Also see Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, *Approaching the Sunnah: Comprehension and Controversy* (London; Washington, DC: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2006).

²⁴ D. Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 120.

²⁵ Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, "Refutation of Yusuf al Qaradawi," lecture from www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lg4RYBCdfI, last accessed November 1, 2018.

simply because a ḥadīth is authentic it is applicable. The context, language, and the intent of the Prophet must be taken into consideration. If a ḥadīth appears to contradict another ḥadīth or the Qur'ān, there must be an attempt to reconcile them before disregarding it.²⁶ Nevertheless, there were not many fierce debates between Islamic Modernists and Albānī because the former did not pose a great threat to the scholarly authority of Salafis.

Some Islamic Modernists were Salafi in creed but not in their political inclinations or legal methodology. Although Salafis regularly criticized the political activism of Islamic Modernists, many of the latter were primarily concerned with maintaining unity and therefore did not engage Salafis in religious debate. On the other hand, Salafis were suspicious of the *madhhab*s and regularly criticized those who abided by them. This caused sharp debate with Traditionalists and the stakes were crucial for both sides.

TRADITIONALISM

With the acknowledgment that this group is not uniform, my usage of the term “Traditionalists” refers to Muslim scholars who consider adherence to a *madhhab*, speculative theology, and Sufi orders to be representative of the true embodiment of Islam.²⁷ Tradition is often used to refer to practices of a particular group that stands in contrast to modernity or accepting change.²⁸ However, in Islamic history, religious knowledge was primarily validated by a connection to past individuals and institutions, such as an *isnād* leading back to the Prophet, an *ijāza* tracing back to a teacher, or a disciple connecting himself back to a Sufi master.²⁹ William Graham argues that “Traditionalism” is not a rejection of change and challenge, but that it

²⁶ D. Warren, “Islamic Jurisprudence,” 73–74.

²⁷ Several other scholars have similarly defined this group. See J. Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad*. Suheil Laher correctly notes that Traditionalism is composed of a “three-fold knot”: adherence to a *madhhab*, theology, and Sufism. See Suheil Laher, “Re-forming the Knot: ‘Abdullāh al-Ghumārī’s Iconoclastic Sunnī Neo-Traditionalism,” *Journal of College of Sharia and Islamic Studies*, 1 (2018), 202.

²⁸ On modernity, see Emin Poljarevic, “Islamic Tradition and Meanings of Modernity,” *International Journal for History, Culture, and Modernity*, 3, no. 1 (2015), 27–59.

²⁹ William Graham, “Traditionalism in Islam: As Essay in Interpretation,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 23, no. 3 (1993), 522. On tradition, rather than traditionalism, see Muhammad Q. Zaman, “The ‘Ulamā’: Scholarly Tradition and New Public Commentary,” in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, Vol. 6, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 335–354; Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, DC: Centre for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986); Kasper Mathiesen, “Anglo-American ‘Traditional Islam’ and Its Discourse of Orthodoxy,” *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, 13 (2013), 191–195.

consists of a belief that connection with a model past and persons is the only sound way of reforming society. In other words, Traditionalism is based on the past but is fluid and not stuck in it. It could be likened to science, where present works build on and cite past experiments which are deemed “credible.” Traditionalism is primarily a commentary tradition where it is essential to cite and take into consideration previous scholarship. Traditionalism is not a mere inheritance from the past, but rather, as Muhammad Qasim Zaman notes, “is a tradition that has had to be constantly imagined, reconstructed, argued over, defended, and modified.”³⁰ When Traditionalists refer to the past, they are no different than American jurists who seek to understand what the forefathers intended in the Constitution or Bill of Rights.³¹

Alasdair MacIntyre explains that tradition is an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict. The first is with critics external to the tradition who reject all, or essential, elements that are fundamental to it. The second conflict is internal debates through which the meaning and rationale of fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted.³² Therefore, tradition is better understood as discourses extended through time. It is a method of inquiry rather than a set of unchanging doctrines or mandates. Tradition is therefore not simply the repetition of the past, but a continuous effort to understand the present by referring to a set of texts, methodologies, arguments, and practices. It is from within this tradition that claims are accepted or rejected as being Islamic.³³ In one sense, Traditionalists view “tradition” as simply being the Sunna. In another, it is an affective bond between scholars and students linking books with humans. It is through this form of tradition that the Sunna is constantly revived.³⁴

³⁰ M. Zaman, “The ‘Ulamā’,” 10. In this sense, Traditional scholarship always consisted of a rethinking, adaption, and expansion of legal tradition. This is contrary to modern scholarship which often portrays premodern Islamic scholarship as rigid and stagnant. Recent works on the history of premodern Islamic law have demonstrated that the door to *ijtihād* was never closed, but the schools of law were continuously evolving. See M. Zaman, “The ‘Ulamā’,” 18–21; Sherman Jackson, *Islamic Law and the State: The Constitutional Jurisprudence of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996); Wael Hallaq, “Was the Gate of Ijtihad Closed?,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 16 (1984), 3–41.

³¹ S. Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition*, 5.

³² Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 12.

³³ S. Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition*, 4–5.

³⁴ Brannon Ingram, *Revival from Below: The Deoband Movement and Global Islam* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 5.

What distinguishes Traditionalists from others is not necessarily the content of what it means to be an observant Muslim, but that they are primarily concerned with the proper modes by which religious knowledge is acquired. For Traditionalists, it is not sufficient for one to hold the correct beliefs and practice the rituals of Islam. One must also acquire knowledge of Islam through the *ijāza* system. This meant learning from a teacher who is well grounded in the tradition through an established chain of teachers going all the way back to the Prophet.³⁵ Mohammad Fadel explains:

Mastery of religious values emerges through a process of acculturation that enables novices to embody those values. This process of acculturation is distinct from, and transcends, intellectual cognition (*‘ilm*) of religious truth. While religious truth may be a proper subject of instruction (*ta‘līm*), mere instruction, without reliable teachers who properly embody Islamic teachings, cannot produce properly acculturated religious subjects.³⁶

Therefore, Traditionalists believe that individuals cannot achieve virtue on their own and need assistance from a teacher or mentor to lead a virtuous life. Accordingly, Traditionalists do not view themselves as a reform movement, but as individuals who are connected to the Prophet through a scholarly chain of authorities.³⁷ The teachers in this chain make up tradition. The crux of traditional learning is a pedagogical process of “handing down” knowledge and the attitude of valuation and attachment to the maintenance of tradition (i.e., the content or ideas). However, as Sherman Jackson correctly explains, “tradition is not [only] the result of the simple act of transmission or handing down, but of a process of evaluation, amplification, suppression, refinement, and assessing the polarity between would-be tradition and contemporary, indigenous innovations or nonindigenous ideas and practices.”³⁸ ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda (d. 1997), a leading Traditionalist, notes that traditional knowledge is valued because it has been examined, reviewed, and refined thousands of times.³⁹

³⁵ Mohammad Fadel, “Islamic Law and Constitution-Making: The Authoritarian Temptation and the Arab Spring,” *Osgoode Hall Law Journal*, 53, no. 2 (2016), 474–475.

³⁶ M. Fadel, “Islamic Law,” 474–475.

³⁷ The term Traditional Islam or Traditionalism incorporates the essential antithesis to many manifestations and versions of reformist, modernist, and even revivalist Islam in the modern period in its very name. See K. Mathiesen, “Anglo-American,” 193–194.

³⁸ Sherman Jackson, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 42.

³⁹ Abū Ghudda, Lecture in Turkey, lecture from www.youtube.com/watch?v=dobftu6fNe8, last accessed December 20, 2016.

Traditionalist scholarly discourse is primarily done through explaining, commenting on, and editing classical works. Traditionalist scholarship is primarily a commentary tradition and it is uncommon to write independent works.⁴⁰ For instance, approximately fifty-five of Abū Ghudda's seventy-three publications are commentaries on the works of previous scholars. What is most important about this conversation across the generations is not the ingenuity of the commentaries that result from it, but the fact that new generations are trained in how to carry it on.⁴¹ Furthermore, Traditionalists do not view themselves as a reform movement, but as an uninterrupted continuation of *fiqh* scholars.

Traditionalism is best defined as a current within Islam that adheres to what is considered authentically rooted in revelation, has crystallized under the banners of scholarly consensus (*ijmā'*), and been passed on as Islamic knowledge (*'ilm naqlī*) in chains of scholarly authority (*isnād*). It is a current that is didactic and instructional, which stands in opposition to autodidactic "do it yourself" Islam.⁴² Zaman explains that "it is a combination of their intellectual formation, their vocation, and, crucially, their orientation, viz. a certain sense of continuity with the Islamic tradition, that defines the 'ulama as 'ulama."⁴³ Traditionalism allows for gradual change over time, ideally taking place during times of stability, not under duress during and from periods of social upheaval.

It is the sense of continuity that distinguishes Traditionalist '*ulamā*' from other autodidactic, reformist, or modernist versions of Islam. Put simply, my use of the term "Traditionalist" broadly refers to the '*ulamā*', who view themselves as guardians, transmitters, and interpreters of Islamic legal tradition. They are the '*ulamā*' who insist that one must follow a *madhhab* and not break from scholarly consensus. They require that Islam be understood through the schools of law. For Traditionalists, Islam can only be properly understood under the tutelage of a teacher. This must not be misunderstood as a complete rejection of books, but a rejection of them as the only means of learning and obtaining religious authority. Additionally, the terms "Traditional Islam" or "Traditionalism" incorporate the essential antithesis to many manifestations and versions of reformist, modernist, and even revivalist Islam in the modern period in its very name.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ See Muḥammad Āl Rashīd, *Imdād al-Fattāḥ bi-Asānīd wa-Marwīyāt al-Shaykh 'Abd al-Fattāḥ: wa-huwa Ṭabat al-'Allāma al-Muḥaddith al-Faqīh al-Uṣūlī al-Adīb al-Musnid Faḍīlat al-Shaykh 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Imām al-Shāfi'ī, 1999), 180–215.

⁴¹ M. Zaman, "The 'Ulamā'," 338. ⁴² K. Mathiesen, "Anglo-American," 193–194.

⁴³ M. Zaman, "The 'Ulamā'," 10. ⁴⁴ K. Mathiesen, "Anglo-American," 193–194.

By the end of the thirteenth century, Traditionalism had reached its mature, institutional form. At the core of Traditionalism were the four *madhhabs* which provided systematic interpretations of Islamic law and to which Muslim scholars and their educational systems held guild-like loyalty. These reproduced themselves in the madrasa, the center of legal study and broader education led by scholars supported by endowments that were usually gifted by wealthy members of the ruling class. Political rulers and Traditionalist scholars had a mutualistic relationship, with the scholars supporting the political status quo in return for authority in their social and religious institutions.⁴⁵

The fall of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of secular governmental institutions in the Muslim world resulted in the reduction of the traditional pedagogical methods necessary to hold positions of religious leadership. The caliphate served as an embodiment of Muslim unity, not only politically, but also in terms of scholarship. Those who were employed by the state were traditionally trained scholars and they held important positions in government and education. In the Ottoman Empire the role of the scholars expanded as the respective bureaucracies expanded.⁴⁶

It was the scholars who were responsible for the education of the nobility, who staffed various levels of judiciary, and who oversaw the charitable establishment of the Empire. Leading members of the scholarly class ranged from those who led the prayers in small towns to the most prestigious courtiers.⁴⁷ Through their control of important positions such as judges and muftis, the '*ulamā*' eventually became the spokesmen for Islam. They held the recognized authority to interpret scripture and define the religious outlook of society.⁴⁸ In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, strong divisions arose among Traditionalists in their following of the *madhhabs*. Mosques often had separate prayers for different *madhhabs* and this later caused Salafis and Islamic Modernists to consider the *madhhabs* as a source of division in the Muslim community.

⁴⁵ Jonathan Brown, "The Salafi Transformation from Quietism to Parliamentary Giant: Salafism in Egypt and the Nour Party of Alexandria," an unpublished paper based on a talk delivered at a conference, Islam in the New Middle East, March 29–30, 2012, University of Michigan–Ann Arbor, 2–3.

⁴⁶ See Noah Feldman, *The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁴⁷ Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 18–20.

⁴⁸ Suha Farouki and Basheer Nafi, *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 6.

Because Traditionalists believe that religion cannot be understood without transmission, it was necessary for Muslims to follow the *madhhabs* and not deviate from their teachings. They consider the principles that were established by the *madhhabs* to be based on proof-texts, and it is only by following these principles that one can come to authentic Islamic rulings. A common misconception is that Traditionalists follow the eponym of a legal school. Rather, they follow *madhhabs* because they consider them to be a continuation of scholarly discourse over many centuries, which in turn formed a scholarly tradition. A *madhhab* literally means a “way,” and it is primarily an interpretive methodology that binds a group of scholars. The *madhhabs* are named after their founders, but scholars of the *madhhab* may express opinions that are not held, or contradict, that of the founder. All of the opinions within a particular *madhhab* remain part of that *madhhab* as long as they adhere to the methodology laid down by the founder of the school.

Traditionalism stems from a lack of trust in the individual and trust in the scholarly community. Traditionalists maintain that the Qur’ān and the Sunna are what need to be followed, but the Qur’ān and the Sunna always have an interpreter. That interpreter can be the individual or it could be a collective council of scholars. They would consider those who bypass the *madhhabs* and go directly to the Qur’ān and Sunna as committing a “Protestant error.”⁴⁹

However, Salafis rightly point out that there is often a tendency among Traditionalists to shield tradition from the process of review rather than actually undertake it. For instance, if a historical ruling contradicts the apparent meaning of a text, or is not based on any text, and it is to be accepted that the scholar who made that ruling had a valid rationale for it, then it is entirely valid to require that the rationale be made clear and available for examination. The Traditionalists claim of “who are we to do such an examination” is often a means of resisting this very method of continuous examination, which Traditionalists claim makes the tradition valid. Even when Traditionalists provide the rationale for a ruling, they nevertheless advocate limiting discussion of the rationale only to the scholarly elite. They might even describe asking for such a rationale as a violation of *adab*, influenced by modernity or Salafism. Accordingly, Salafism often finds its appeal in promising to provide Muslims with the

⁴⁹ Abdul Hakim Murad, “The Salafi Fallacy,” lecture from www.youtube.com/watch?v=1MRXs5qlXQ, last accessed May 7, 2013.

authentic or true meaning of scripture, free from any obscurities or biases toward a particular scholar or legal school.

SALAFISM

The definition of the term “Salafism” has resulted in some debate among scholars.⁵⁰ To date, most works have focused on the political aspect of Salafism. By doing so, they miss its legal and hermeneutical underpinnings.⁵¹ For instance, Wiktorowicz divides Salafis according to their involvement, or lack thereof, in politics. One must ask why they should be divided as such and not according to, for instance, their interpretive methodology.⁵² Overemphasizing the political aspect of Salafism is problematic because Salafism is not a political movement, but rather a method of understanding Islam. Failure to account for the compelling nature of the religious message of Salafism will result in mischaracterizing the movement as politically, rather than religiously, driven.

Using the term “Salafism” can lead to confusion because in essence every Muslim would consider themselves a Salafi in the sense that they are trying to emulate the Prophet and the early Muslim community (the *salaf*). Salafis label themselves as such since they aspire to follow the *salaf* because they were closest to the era of the Prophet and are understood to best embody pristine and pure Islam. Those who describe themselves as Salafi do so in order to highlight the authenticity of their particular understanding of Islam. The use of the term “Salafi” could be understood as a tactic some modern Muslims use to increase their authority, influence, and power. However,

⁵⁰ Frank Griffel, “What Do We Mean by ‘Salafi’? Connecting Muḥammad ‘Abduh with Egypt’s Nūr Party in Islam’s Contemporary Intellectual History,” *Die Welt des Islams*, 55 (2015), 186–220; Henri Lauzière, “The Construction of Salafiyya: Reconsidering Salafism from Perspective of Conceptual History,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 42, no. 3 (2010); idem, *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); idem, “What We Mean versus What They Mean by ‘Salafi’: A Reply to Frank Griffel,” *Die Welt des Islams*, 56, no. 1 (2016), 89–96; Bernard Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action,” in *Global Salafism*, ed. Roel Meijer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 33–57; J. Brown, “Salafi Transformation,” 3; Ovamir Anjum, “Salafis and Democracy: Doctrine and Context,” *The Muslim World*, 106, no. 3 (2016), 448–473.

⁵¹ Thomas Hegghammer, “Jihadi-Salafis or Revolutionaries?,” in *Global Salafism*, ed. Roel Meijer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 244–266; Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 29 (2006), 207–239; Christopher M. Blanchard, *The Islamic Traditions of Wahhabism and Salafiyya* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, 2007).

⁵² Q. Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy.”

Salafis are not monolithic and, unlike the individual *madhhabs*, Salafis do not have one shared legal methodology.

One should note that definitions of such abstract terms can shift and change over time. This has also been the case with the term “Salafism.” The term “Salafi” has been applied to a variety of people, such as Albānī, Rashīd Riḍā, Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Qayyim (d. 751/1350), and even Osama b. Laden (d. 2011). Obviously, each of these individuals is distinct, and in many cases radically different in methodology despite sharing the label of “Salafi.” Nevertheless, though controversial, the terms “Salafi” and “Salafism” are unavoidable. Henri Lauzière traces the history of the term *salafiyya* and argues that the term “Salafism” being used to refer to a particular group is a modern phenomenon. He argues that “Salafism” and “Salafi” are used anachronistically, omitting scholars and movements from the fourteenth century to the present day with great inaccuracy. An actual coherent, self-identifying Salafi movement did not emerge until the twentieth century. In other words, Salafism as a label for a movement is of recent origin.⁵³

The relationship between Islamic Modernism and the modern Salafi movement, and the use of the term “Salafi,” has been subject to confusion among academics. The two movements are not directly linked. In the early twentieth century, during Riḍā’s lifetime, being a Salafi and a modernist at the same time posed no conceptual problem because “Salafi” was primarily a theological label: unlike today, the two were not mutually exclusive. So, just as an Ash‘arī could be a modernist, so could a Salafi. Riḍā was an Islamic Modernist, which meant that he stood against certain traditional patterns in the Muslim world which he considered to be deviant from the original Islamic model of the Prophet and early Muslim generations. Modernists believed that these practices were responsible for the stagnation and rigidity of Islam and consequently prevented Muslims from joining the modern world. They were critical of practices like *taqlīd* which they understood to be the uncritical following in the footsteps of the last generation of scholars within one school of law and performing acts of worship that were not sanctioned by the Qur’ān and Sunna.

From their point of view, the dynamism and spirit of modernity were always part of the original teachings of Islam, but Muslims lost this spirit due to certain historical developments and became rigidly traditional in their thinking. While the Muslim world was stagnant, the west picked this spirit

⁵³ H. Lauzière, “Construction.”

up and modernized further. Therefore, ‘Abduh and Riḍā were primarily modernists, rather than Salafis. Riḍā on occasion did refer to himself as Salafi, but his usage of the label did not have the same meaning as it would today. This is primarily because the term “Salafism” is not an accurate term to describe the modernist movement, nor did it represent a clear trend.⁵⁴

There were scholars before Riḍā who identified their views with the “righteous predecessors” (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*) to underline their Islamic authenticity, in contrast to the views of those they deemed to be deviant. Because much of the Islamic Modernist movement’s works were published by the Salafi publishing house, the movement came to be known as the Salafi one. It interpreted Islam in such a way that it was largely compatible with modern reason and with many of the accomplishments of modern western civilization.

In the eighteenth century, Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb introduced his own purist version of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula. Like Islamic Modernists who appeared a century after him, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb rejected what he considered innovative acts such as saint worship or worship of natural beings like trees. Unlike Islamic Modernists, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb did not seek to revolutionize Islamic law; rather, he primarily followed the Ḥanbalī school. The Salafiyya publishing house established a branch in the Arabian Peninsula and started to publish works from Wahhabi scholars. After some time, the term “Salafism” came to be identified with a more purist version of Islam. The movement of ‘Abduh and Riḍā did try to move in the direction of the *salaf* but with a different objective than Albānī’s understanding of Salafism. Wagemakers correctly states: “Although these reformists shared a preference for certain concepts with their present-day namesakes, such as an emphasis on *tawḥīd* and a rejection of *taqlīd*, in the end theirs was a thoroughly modernist discourse, as opposed to the purifying tone of contemporary Salafis.”⁵⁵

This anti-*taqlīd* modernist movement may have prepared the Islamic arena for the emergence of modern Salafism, but the two movements are quite different. At most, what could be said is that Salafis were inspired by this anti-*taqlīd* movement. Riḍā developed the classical jurisprudential principles of *maṣlaḥa* (public interest) and *ḍarūra* (necessity) into expansive tools through which one could adapt the Sharia to the exigencies of modern life, thus sidestepping many of the substantive rulings of medieval jurisprudence without confronting them head on. However, the central concern

⁵⁴ H. Lauzière, “Construction”; J. Wagemakers, *Quietist*, 6.

⁵⁵ J. Wagemakers, *Quietist*, 7.

driving this reform was a modernist one. The concerns of Salafis were different and more indigenous to the Islamic tradition. Their methodology is vastly different from that of Islamic Modernists. Salafis believe that Islam provided a single solution to every question. As a result of their ḥadīth-based methodology, Salafis did not only differ with the reformists and modernist movement of Riḍā, but often arrived at completely opposite conclusions.⁵⁶

Despite the fact that Salafism did not exist as a label for a movement prior to the twentieth century, modern Salafis draw on a history of iconoclastic scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Qayyim, and Muḥammad al-Shawkānī. While it is true that modern Salafism is not a transcription of purist movements of the past, simply replicated into modernity, it does have similar tendencies to historical movements. Although the usage of the term “Salafi” to describe premodern scholars may be useful, one must keep in mind that religious movements are organic and ever-changing because they are composed of individuals who affect and are affected by their circumstances.

The ultimate question is what makes one a Salafi? Is it their rejection of *taqlīd* and emphasis on *tawḥīd*? Or is it their labeling themselves as Salafi? Those who describe themselves as Salafi do so in order to highlight their own purity, and the impurity of other movements. Salafis do not have one shared legal methodology like the adherents of a *madhhab*. Moreover, portraying the *salaf*, or early Muslim generations, as being homogeneous further complicates the issue. When one labels themselves a follower of the early generation, which individual or group among them are they referring to? The Prophet’s Companions and early Muslims, like Muslims today, disagreed in their understanding and interpretation of Islam.

The generic nature of the term “Salafism” is complicated by the fact that dozens of groups identify themselves as Salafi and each of them claims to exclusively represent “true Salafism.”⁵⁷ Many groups call themselves Salafis, or do not object to being called Salafi, yet differ with each other on several issues, such as the necessity of following a *madhhab*, level of allegiance toward an Islamic ruler, and theological positions on what constitutes faith.⁵⁸

However, there are some general characteristics that pertain to all Salafis without exception, such as the fact that they consider themselves as correctly

⁵⁶ Daniel Lav, *Radical Islam and the Revival of Medieval Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 110.

⁵⁷ Yasir Qadhi, “On Salafi Islam,” <http://muslimmatters.org/2014/04/22/on-salafi-islam-dr-yasir-qadhi>, last accessed June 26, 2014.

⁵⁸ J. Wagemakers, *Quietist*, 10.

espousing the teachings and beliefs of the *salaf* and the creed that was transmitted from them. Yet, even on the issue of creed they differ when it comes to the theological position on faith and whether actions constitute a requisite part of faith or are subsidiary to it.⁵⁹ All Salafis reject any possibility of metaphoric or symbolic interpretation of God's divine names and attributes (*tawhīd al-asmā' wa-l-ṣifāt*). Additionally, they affirm God's exclusive right to be worshipped (*tawhīd al-ulūhiyya*) and reject anything that may directly or indirectly compromise it. Hence, certain Sufi practices such as saint veneration and intercession of the dead are strongly condemned.

Salafis also reject religious innovation (*bid'a*) and disassociate themselves from those who ascribe to it. Salafis tend to respect and take recourse to the legal and theological opinions of Ibn Taymiyya; however, it is important to note that Ibn Taymiyya cannot be considered a progenitor for the modern Salafi movement, as Salafis view themselves as having no one single founder after the Prophet Muhammad.⁶⁰

Nonetheless, as discussed above, there are many diverse trends within Salafism. Saudi Salafism, sometimes referred to as Wahhabism, is made up of major Saudi religious figures and they often adhere to the Ḥanbalī *madhhab*.⁶¹ They tend to be quietist and Salafi in creed but not law. Another group is the *Ṣaḥwa* Salafi movement which is primarily made up of Saudi scholars who call for political and social activism, but they do not go so far as to call for the overthrow of Muslim rulers who do not rule by Islamic law. The term *Ṣaḥwa* conveys political activism and social involvement. This movement is led by individuals such as Safar al-Ḥawālī and Salmān al-ʿAwda, who is one of the Saudi kingdom's most prominent religious figures.⁶²

Madkhalism is a strain of Salafism based on the teachings of Rabīʿ al-Madkhalī. Madkhalism is particularly supportive of Arab regimes and was primarily a reaction to the *Ṣaḥwa* movement. Madkhalīs refer to *Ṣaḥwa* Salafis as Qutbīs because of their connection with the political thoughts of Syed Qutb (d. 1966). Rabīʿ al-Madkhalī derived many of his teachings from

⁵⁹ J. Wagemakers, *Quietest*, 10; Y. Qadhi, "Salafi Islam."

⁶⁰ J. Wagemakers, *Quietest*, 3–4; Y. Qadhi, "Salafi Islam."

⁶¹ The term "Wahhabi" is primarily used by the critics of this group. The members of this group reject the term because they do not consider themselves to be followers of Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb. On Wahhabism see David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006); Natana DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁶² Y. Qadhi, "Salafi Islam."

Albānī and they share a purist ideology and intolerance toward their opponents. However, Madkhalīs are far more intolerant and are consistently debating among themselves about who is on the correct path (*manhaj*). Unlike Albānī's followers, Madkhalīs are a shrinking community, which may be because most Salafis do not consider religious fatwas of Madhkhalīs to be academically sound due to their support for secular governments in the Muslim world.

There are also jihadi Salafis who believe that violence is necessary to produce political change. There are several Salafi jihadi groups, although some only write about the importance of jihad while not actually participating in it, such as Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī and Abū Muṣ'ab al-Sūrī. Although groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS have some theological points in common with other Salafis, they are usually condemned by most Salafis for their acts of violence. Some scholars and policy makers have argued that ISIS is a direct result of Salafi methodology. This is inaccurate not only because it ignores the political causes of the rise of ISIS, but because most Salafis and Wahhabis routinely condemn ISIS as misinterpreting and distorting the teachings of Salafism and Wahhabism. Furthermore, very few Salafis succumb to ISIS and are quite capable of seeing how it contradicts the teachings of mainstream Islam.

Ḥatīm al-ʿAwnī, a renowned Saudi cleric who at an earlier stage of his life was well respected and admired by mainstream Wahhabis, has gained fame and notoriety by championing the claim that these jihadist movements are in fact representative of true classical Wahhabi thought. He claims that the architects and justifiers of such jihadist movements rely heavily on *Al-Durar al-Saniyya*, the primary collection of Wahhabi writings dating from the eighteenth century. ʿAwnī uses ISIS's inspiration from Salafism to invite mainstream Salafis to review and reform their methodology.⁶³ Although there may be a link between ISIS and Salafism, any interpretive tradition may give rise to certain kinds of apocalyptic theologies that are perversions of that tradition's dominant ideals. The link between the two is similar to the association between Reformation Anabaptists and Protestants. The essential point is that these are perversions, just as mob rule is a perversion of democracy, even if it is, in an important way, enabled by the latter.

Salafis in Egypt were popular prior to the Arab spring, but have lost much of their credibility since. This group was primarily apolitical and criticized all

⁶³ Yasir Qadhi, "Reformation or Reconstruction: Dr. Ḥatīm al-ʿAwnī's Critiques of Modern Wahhabī Thought," presentation of an unpublished paper at the American Academy of Religion, November 21, 2016.

political involvement until the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak (d. 2020) in the Arab spring, at which point they shifted their stance as they had an opportunity at governing Egypt. Currently, they have conflicting views on political involvement within the movement: some of them are critical of the Egyptian government, others remain apolitical, while the Noor party is particularly supportive of the current ruler Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.⁶⁴ They are purists with regard to their legal methodology and do not follow the *madhhabs*.⁶⁵

Each of these groups aspires to live according to “the way of the *salaf*.” In acknowledging that the early Muslim generations represent an ideal, they recognize that the past is gone and that they can only try to relive it, though it will not come alive today as it was then. The way modern Muslims interact with their tradition has fundamentally changed. In addition, the meaning of a term like “Salafism” and the ideal Muslims attempt to embody is not fixed, changes over time, and is contingent on the way individuals define it. The previously mentioned types of Salafis demonstrate the diversity found within Salafism, and also illustrate how using the term “Salafi” to simultaneously describe all these groups can be confusing and problematic.

PURIST SALAFISM

This book focuses on the version of Salafism practiced by Albānī and his students, and I refer to them as purist Salafis. This brand of Salafism quickly spread throughout the Muslim world in the late twentieth century. Albānī was staunchly opposed to the *madhhabs* and advocated a textualist-based jurisprudence. His strand of Salafism also tends to be the most literalist in *fiqh* and strict in its application of the concept of *bid‘a* to practices that most other Salafis would view as innocuous.⁶⁶

A strong anti-*madhhab* campaign lies at the heart of purist Salafism. Although purist Salafi anti-*madhhabism* may have been inspired by the likes of Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Qayyim, and Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, their attitude toward the *madhhabs* is distinct. Although these three scholars were anti-*taqlīd* to varying degrees, they were not anti-*madhhab*. Indeed, many scholars who are identified with Salafism, such as Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn

⁶⁴ On the Salafi Nour Party see J. Brown, “Salafi Transformation”; Khalil al-Anani and Malik Maszlee, “Pious Way to Politics: The Rise of Political Salafism in Post-Mubarak Egypt,” *Digest of Middle East Studies*, 22, no. 1 (2013), 57–73.

⁶⁵ On purist Salafis in Egypt, see Richard Gauvain, *Salafi Ritual Purity: In the Presence of God* (London: Routledge, 2013).

⁶⁶ Y. Qadhi, “On Salafi Islam.”

Kathīr (d. 774/1373), were themselves members of a *madhhab*.⁶⁷ Ibn Taymiyya did not prohibit *taqlīd* for laypeople. Even regular scholars could perform *taqlīd*, with the exception of matters where the evidence is clear that their *madhhab*'s position contradicts the Qur'ān and Sunna, or that another *madhhab* has stronger evidence. Besides these instances, Ibn Taymiyya advised people to stick to their *madhhabs*. By contrast, Albānī and purist Salafis refuse to be affiliated with any scholar or *madhhab*.⁶⁸

This refusal distinguishes him from Saudi Salafi scholars like 'Abd al-'Azīz Ibn Bāz and Muḥammad b. Ṣāliḥ al-'Uthaymīn (d. 2001), and other Saudi clerics who follow the Ḥanbalī *madhhab*. Although they acknowledged that a stronger proof-text would trump the school's teachings, this concession was largely rhetorical. Whereas Albānī was a systematic and principled anti-*madhhabist* in both rhetoric and practice, these Saudi clerics were not concerned with persuading other Muslims to abandon the *madhhabs*. In this regard, Albānī has more in common with anti-*madhhab* Islamic Modernists than he does with Saudi scholars who adhered to the Ḥanbalī school. The large number of heated book-length responses between Albānī and Traditionalists throughout the Muslim world indicates how much they felt threatened by each other.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Ismā'īl Ibn Kathīr, *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi'iyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Madār al-Islāmī, 2002), 6.

⁶⁸ Emad Hamdeh, "Qur'ān and Sunna or the Madhhabs?: A Salafi Polemic against Islamic Legal Tradition," *Islamic Law and Society*, 24, no. 3 (June 2017), 1–43.

⁶⁹ For Traditionalist responses to Salafism see 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda, *Kalimāt fī Kashf Abqātil wa Iftirā'āt* (Aleppo: Maktabat al-Maṭbū'āt al-Islāmiyya, 1990); Ismā'īl al-Anṣārī, *Ibāḥat al-Taḥallī bi l-Dhahab al-Muḥallaq wa l-Radd 'alā al-Albānī fī Taḥrīmi-hi* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Imam al-Shāfi'ī, 1988); idem, *Taṣḥīḥ Ṣalāt al-Tarāwīḥ 'Ishrīn Rak'a wa l-Radd 'alā al-Albānī fī Taḍ'īf-hi* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Imam al-Shāfi'ī, 1988); Muḥammad 'Awwāma, *Adab al-Ikhtilāf fī Masā'il al-'ilm wa l-Dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Bashā'ir al-Islāmiyya, 1997); idem, *Athar al-Ḥadīth al-Sharīf fī Ikhtilāf al-A'imma al-Fuqahā' Raḍī Allāhu 'an-hum* (Beirut: Dār al-Bashā'ir al-Islāmiyya, 1997); Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-A'zamī (d. 1992), *Al-Albānī: Shudhūdhu-hu wa Akhtā'u-hu* (Kuwait: Maktabat Dār al-'Urūbah, 1984); Muḥammad Ramaḍān al-Būṭī, *Al-Lā Madhhabīyya Akhtār Bid'a Tuhaddid al-Sharī'a al-Islāmiyya* (Damascus: Dār al-Farābī, 2005); 'Abd Allāh al-Ghumārī (d. 1993), *Al-Radd 'alā al-Albānī* (Beirut: Dār al-Janān, 1991); Gabriel F. Haddad, *Al-Albani: A Concise Guide to the Chief Innovator of Our Time*, http://sunnah.org/history/Innovators/al_albani.htm, last accessed June 17, 2020; idem, *Albani & His Friends: A Concise Guide to the Salafi Movement* (Birmingham, UK: AQSA Publications, 2004); Maḥmūd Mamduḥ, *Al-Ta'rīf bi-Awhām man Qassama al-Sunan ilā Ṣaḥīḥ wa Ḍa'īf* (Dubai: Dār al-Buḥūth li'l-Dirāsāt al-Islāmiyya wa Iḥyā' al-Turāth, 2000); idem, *Tanbīh al-Muslim ilā Ta'addī al-Albānī 'alā Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Mujallad al-'Arabī, 2011); idem, *Wuṣūl al-Tahānī bi Ithbāt Sunniyyat al-Subḥa wa l-Radd 'alā al-Albānī* (Cairo: Dār al-Imām al-Tirmidhī, 1994); Muḥammad al-Nu'mānī (d. 1999), *Makānat al-Imām Abī Ḥanīfa fī l-Ḥadīth*, ed. 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda (Beirut: Maktabat al-Maṭbū'āt al-Islāmiyya, 2007); Ḥasan Saqqāf, *Ihtijāj al-Khā'ib bi- 'Ibārat man Idda 'ā al-Ijmā'*

The Salafi imagination reconstructs the early Muslims' religious, cultural, and ethical habits, and insists on emulating them in ethics and theology. The attraction of Salafism lies mainly in the form of authority it promotes, and reproduces, as well as the particular hermeneutics it advocates. A typical Salafi argument is that, unlike other Muslims, their views are based only on proof-texts. Hence, Salafis view themselves as pure and others as in need of purification.⁷⁰ Albānī considered the legal confusion, illicit innovation in religion, and all other problems facing Islam and Muslims were a result of not properly adhering to the science of ḥadīth.

For Albānī, the application of the apparent meaning of scripture took precedence overall. He applied ḥadīth in a direct and confrontational manner which furthered his iconoclastic reputation. His unconventional views and character attracted much confrontation, not only with Traditionalists, but also with other Salafis in Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Scholars from throughout the Muslim world felt the need to refute and debate Albānī. These debates may appear to revolve around trivial issues compared to the larger problems facing the Muslim world at the time. However, what consumed both sides in the debate was an attempt to defend their particular method of interpreting scripture and "authentic" Islam.

Albānī and purist Salafis cannot be understood outside of the context of the many confrontations they had with Traditionalists. Salafism is purist in nature and is often compared to Protestantism because it strips interpretive authority from religious institutions and empowers individual interpretation of Islamic scripture. On the other hand, Traditionalism can be compared to Catholicism in the sense that it is an institutional understanding of Islam that developed over centuries of scholarship. The Salafi movement has been characterized as the Protestant reformation of Sunni Islam because Salafis view themselves as purifying the syncretic practices that crept into the faith over the many centuries in the exact same manner that Martin Luther viewed himself as purifying a culturally corrupted Christianity.⁷¹

Fahuwa Kādhīb (Amman: Maktabat al-Imām al-Nawawī, 1990); idem, *Qāmūs Shatā'im al-Albānī* (Amman: Dār al-Imām al-Nawawī, 1993).

⁷⁰ B. Haykel, "Salafi Thought," 34–36.

⁷¹ Interview with Asma Afsaruddin and Jonathan Brown, "How Islamic Is Isis, Really?," Here & Now, Boston NPR News Station (Boston, MA: WBUR, November 19, 2015). See J. Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad*, 161–175. Yasir Qadhi explains that "Salafis are the Protestant reformation of Sunni Islam. There is no question about it that Salafis view themselves as the Protestant reformation. They are purifying the syncretic practices that crept into the faith over the many centuries in the exact same manner that Martin Luther viewed himself as purifying a cultural corrupted Christianity." Interview with Yasir Qadhi, "Salafi Muslims: Following the Ancestors of Islam," *Interfaith Voices* (February 21, 2013).

Purist Salafis are suspicious of scholars who belonged to Traditionalist institutions. Consequently, they were critical of the *madhhabs* and circumvented them in order to interpret the scripture anew. In other words, purist Salafis hold that scripture is clear and “speaks for itself.” Hence Albānī often argues that laypeople should follow the texts rather than scholarly institutions that interpret them. He used the availability of information through print to deconstruct Traditionalist textual hermeneutics and construct his own means for interpreting the jurisprudential requirements of sacred scripture.

For Traditionalists, scholarly tradition is indispensable to the acquisition of religious knowledge and virtues because the mastery and embodiment of religious values by novices emerges through a process of acculturation. This process of acculturation is distinct from and transcends intellectual cognition of religious truth. While religious truth may be a proper subject of instruction, without reliable teachers who properly embody Islamic teachings, mere instruction cannot produce properly acculturated religious subjects.⁷² For this reason, Traditionalism continues to place great emphasis on Sufi tradition because of the belief that the institutions and practices that Sufism cultivates, including the hierarchical relationship between teacher and student, are indispensable in the production of a properly embodied practice of Islam. Under the Traditionalist scheme, then, individuals lack the independent capacity to achieve virtue and need assistance from others in order to enable them to live virtuous lives.⁷³

Albānī does not reject the distinction Traditionalists make between intellectually understanding the truth of Islam and the actual embodiment of its teachings. However, he rejects the necessity of tradition as a precondition for embodying Islamic teachings. He maintains that any properly motivated individual who has sufficient intellectual skills may study the basic sources of Islam independently and obtain an adequate degree of religious knowledge and virtue. Despite his critics, he considers himself to have reverence for the scholarly teachings found in the *madhhabs*, but his loyalty and allegiance is ultimately to the truth. He has no problem with being unsympathetic or antagonistic toward the *madhhabs* if they contradict authentic proof-texts. In contrast, Traditionalists believed that texts could only be properly understood in light of scholarly tradition, legal or otherwise. They often subjugate

⁷² For a study of this acculturation in contemporary learning circles see Rudolph T. Ware, *The Walking Quran: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

⁷³ Mohammad Fadel, “Islamic Law,” 2–3.

scripture to legal principles whereas purist Salafis maintain that texts override all non-textual sources. Traditionalists oppose not only the unconventional opinions held by purist Salafis, but their legal, exegetical, and pedagogical methodology as well because it threatens their scholarly authority and institutions.

ALBĀNĪ AND MODERNISTS

As previously noted, many reform movements of the twentieth century were not producing change in the Muslim world. Purist Salafis were discontented with most Islamic reform movements, despite being inspired by some of their members or some slight similarities between them. Like Modernists, Albānī challenged the traditional manner of interpreting Islamic texts; but, unlike them, he emphasized their authenticity and was not concerned whether a ruling served contemporary social welfare needs or was relevant to modern advancements. Albānī followed a more literalist understanding of Islam based only on scripture and the precedent of the early Muslim community. He focused on purifying religious beliefs and actions and therefore rejected much of what is considered traditional Islam. Albānī's early interest in ḥadīth studies, which constitutes a turning point in challenging tradition, began when he encountered an article in the *al-Manār* journal written by Rashīd Riḍā.⁷⁴

Riḍā criticized Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī's (d. 505/1111) *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (*Revival of the Religious Sciences*) for its use of weak ḥadīth and its Sufism. Ghazālī and his works are celebrated by many in the Muslim world, particularly his work the *Iḥyā'*. Many Muslims take their religious knowledge and practices from this book and have great reverence for Ghazālī who is viewed as a religious reformer.⁷⁵ Riḍā's criticism of the *Iḥyā'* played a significant role in inspiring Albānī to criticize everything he considered to be extra-textual to the religion.

Albānī was influenced by Riḍā's willingness to challenge tradition; not only did he challenge a celebrated and revered scholar like Ghazālī, but he also encouraged Muslims to question the works of classical scholars.

⁷⁴ Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, "Tarjamāt al-Shaykh al-Albānī: Nash'at al-Shaykh fī Dimashq," lecture from www.islamway.com, last accessed May 30, 2011.

⁷⁵ There are many Muslims and scholars who strongly condemned the *Iḥyā'* for its use of fabricated ḥadīth and fictitious stories. In 503/1109, the scholars of Andalusia gathered to burn the *Iḥyā'* in the courtyard of the city's mosque. See Kenneth Garden, "Al-Ghazālī's Contested Revival: *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* and Its Critics in Khorasan and the Maghrib" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2005), 152–153.

Riḍā's article led Albānī to read a book by Zayn al-Dīn al-'Irāqī (d. 806/1404) which detailed the weak ḥadīth found in Ghazālī's *Iḥyā'*, which caused Albānī to be suspicious of Sufism and weak ḥadīth, both of which were means for foreign teachings to enter Islam. This motivated Albānī to study ḥadīth in an effort to purge Islam and its sciences from its impurities. Hence, Albānī's endeavor to purify the religion was inspired by Riḍā, but Riḍā's influence on Albānī was limited to that spark of interest in the field of ḥadīth.⁷⁶

At the time, the *al-Manār* journal was the major vehicle for spreading Muslim reformist thought. Although he was influenced by Riḍā, Albānī's methodology was different in several ways. Riḍā allowed reason to play a central role in understanding religious texts, but Albānī believed that the use of reason must be removed from the legal process. In Albānī's view, reason is limited to understanding the direct meaning of scripture. Additionally, despite the fact that Riḍā had called for the reexamination of *āḥād*⁷⁷ ḥadīth, he was reluctant to question the authenticity of *mutawātir* ḥadīth. Albānī, on the other hand, called for a reexamination of the entire corpus of ḥadīth, including the *mutawātir*.⁷⁸

What Riḍā and Albānī have in common is their rejection of *taqlīd* and challenging what they believed to be false practices of their time. However, Riḍā differs from Albānī in his modernism and rationalization. Albānī noted that Riḍā's works often departed from the Sunna.⁷⁹ Riḍā was primarily interested in reforming Islam in a modernist way. Unlike Albānī, purging all Islamic literature of weak ḥadīth was not Riḍā's primary focus.⁸⁰ Albānī did not give much attention to Islamic Modernists like 'Abduh and Riḍā because he did not view them as a serious threat to his scholarly authority. In fact, he considered many Islamic Modernists to be whimsical when it came to interpreting Islam. As previously noted, Albānī accused both Muḥammad al-Ghazālī and Qaraḍāwī of interpreting religious texts based on their whims.⁸¹

Qaraḍāwī and Ghazālī sympathized with Albānī's reformist tendencies, and there was never much debate between them. Because they were both part of the Muslim Brotherhood, they emphasized unity of Muslims and

⁷⁶ Emad Hamdeh, "The Formative Years of an Iconoclastic Salafi Scholar," *The Muslim World*, 106, no. 3 (2016), 411–432.

⁷⁷ *Aḥād ḥadīth* is best defined as a ḥadīth that does not meet the conditions of *mutawātir*.

⁷⁸ D. Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 41.

⁷⁹ Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, "Masā'il wa Ajwibatuḥā," *Al-Aṣāla* (1994), 39.

⁸⁰ See J. Wagemakers, "Salafism's Historical Continuity," 214–215.

⁸¹ N. al-Albānī, "Refutation of Yusuf al Qaradawi."

hence remained respectful toward Albānī despite his numerous attacks on them. Unity among Muslims is one of Qaraḏāwī's main concerns and he therefore sought to seek a middle ground between Ghazālī and Albānī.⁸² On the other hand, Traditionalists were in a constant struggle over interpretive authority with Albānī, and hence much of his criticisms were directed toward them. Albānī viewed them as unwavering, blind followers of the four legal schools. Albānī also criticized Sufism and viewed it as completely foreign to Islam. This resulted in debates concerning topics such as *tawassul*, the use of prayer beads, and whether the dead can hear.

However, these debates almost always developed into arguments about the authenticity of particular ḥadīth. Due to Salafi criticisms of Traditionalists' interpretive methodology, Traditionalists throughout the Muslim world attacked Salafis as being simplistic literalists. Islamic Modernists and Salafis both criticized *taqlīd* and Traditionalists, but for different reasons. Islamic Modernists blamed Traditionalists for the fall of the Islamic caliphate because they were "backward" and out of touch with the modern world. Salafis placed blame on Traditionalists because they held on to a tradition that was full of "incorrect" opinions that went against the Sunna. At a time when Traditionalists were facing all of the challenges of modernity and the fall of the caliphate, Albānī emerged and furthered the spread of purist Salafism.

ALBĀNĪ AND THE SPREAD OF SALAFISM

Albānī played an important role in promoting Salafism as not only a creed, but a methodology that encompassed legal, political, and social elements. Some scholars have credited Albānī with empowering common Muslims and students to challenge scholars by asking them for proof-texts.⁸³ Albānī's books became very famous in the Muslim world and his students recorded and spread most of his lectures. He has proven to be very influential in Salafi circles. For instance, if one reads the fascinating account of how Bilal Philips was thrown off "the *manhaj*" by his peers, then one would notice an interesting phenomenon. To prove his worth and authenticity as a true Salafi he continually invoked his relationship with Albānī and his service to his works. He talked about how he used to sit at his feet, and how he has a library full of his unreleased lectures. The

⁸² See D. Warren, "Islamic Jurisprudence."

⁸³ See Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 85.

fact that he never once invoked anyone else speaks volumes on Albānī's position among contemporary Salafis.⁸⁴

Albānī's understanding of Islam has similarities to important authorities such as Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Qayyim, and Muḥammad al-Shawkānī. Despite the fact that he was different to these individuals, he was inspired by their attempts to purify particular aspects of the religion, such as creed, and took it a step further by trying to purify the entire religion. This brand of Salafism was also different than Wahhabism because the latter followed the Ḥanbalī *madhhab*, while Albānī and his followers did not. Although Wahhabis were strict with regards to differing in issues of creed, they were tolerant concerning differences in law and legal theory.

Purist Salafis project themselves into history: they retell the history of their historical forefathers and attempt to make themselves in their image. This sometimes leads to confusion in terminology. Essentially, every Muslim would claim that they are following the Prophet and the early Muslims; but Albānī used the term "Salafi" to describe his own, particular, and perhaps unprecedented understanding of Islam. Albānī had tremendous influence and his views and methodology shaped Muslims' understanding of Salafism. He made Islamic scripture, especially ḥadīth, accessible to a large group of people, whereas before it was primarily limited to the scholarly class.

He understood what arguments appealed to laypeople and employed them in a religious context. For instance, a Shāfi'ī scholar's authority is validated and supported by the school he belongs to and the teachers he studied with. Albānī did not have the reinforcement of a *madhhab* organization or a teacher, yet he managed to create this powerful reform movement which he called Salafism. Albānī had the ability to put together a very straightforward methodology and extend it to every area of *fiqh* and ḥadīth even if it resulted in unpopular decisions.

LITERALISM

Purist Salafis are often referred to as literalists, and although they had literalist tendencies, they were not literalists like the Zāhirī school or Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064). Some Salafis encouraged their followers to follow the literal meaning of texts in acts of worship. For example, Muqbil al-Wādi'ī (d. 2001), a leading Salafi in Yemen, rejected *qiyās* as a source of law based on the fact that the Prophet would often wait for revelation when asked a

⁸⁴ See Bilal Philips "Reply to Critics," article from www.bilalphilips.com, last accessed August 28, 2012.

question. He permitted scholars to use *qiyās* but rejected it as a source of law. In his view, *qiyās* is a human endeavor and its results cannot be attributed to God. The sources of Islam are only the Qur'ān and Sunna.⁸⁵ When asked about Ibn Ḥazm's Zāhirism, al-Wādi'ī said "We advise every Muslim to be a Zāhirī."⁸⁶ His understanding of Zāhirism was a direct following of texts and rejected performing the *taqlīd* of Ibn Ḥazm or any other scholar. By holding closely to the literal meanings of Islamic scripture, Wadi'ī, like Albānī, established an understanding of Islam that he believed to be correct, unlike all others.

Albānī focused on reviving the Sunna as it is compiled in ḥadīth collections. The *madhhab*s, Sufism, and involvement in speculative theology were barriers between Muslims and the words of God and the Prophet. The departure from the texts of the Qur'ān and Sunna have led Muslims to engage in unorthodox rituals that threatened Islam's core teachings. Consequently, Albānī considered it necessary to purge Islam of all foreign elements. In this process many scholars attacked him, accusing him of discarding scholarly tradition.

Albānī's iconoclastic views resulted in disputations with many of those around him. He differed with the Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia, the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, and Traditionalists throughout the Muslim world. Naturally, his students and followers also clashed with members of these movements. Hence, the movement he established was one that carried the reputation of being intolerant and confrontational.

Although they thought that it is only by applying their understanding of Islam that the Muslim world will be saved, Albānī and his students often failed to realistically describe how following the *salaf* can be manifested in the modern world. With technological advancements, the world has rapidly changed since the premodern period. Albānī calls for a "returning to the Salaf" but does not usually explain what this will look like in practice. The political situation in the Muslim world likely frustrated Albānī as well as his critics, and many resorted to a focus on ḥadīth, law, and rituals rather than politics, jihad, and social justice. As Albānī was a quietist, for whom political involvement in any shape or form is prohibited, many questioned the effectiveness of his brand of Salafism.

⁸⁵ See Muqbil al-Wādi'ī, Response to question on his leaning toward Ibn Ḥazm's teachings, www.muqbel.net/fatwa.php?fatwa_id=4463, last accessed May 1, 2020.

⁸⁶ Muqbil Al-Wādi'ī, *Ijābat al-Sā'il 'alā Aḥam al-Māsā'il* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥaramayn, 1999), 562.